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ABSTRACT

The change of the political system in Hungary stimulates a great deal of discussion about the consequent modification of the educational system. Almost every aspect of schooling is to be changed: the content of teaching, the basic structure of public education, the decision-making system, the dependency relationships, etc. Within this context we examined how the students perceive the changes around them. During the spring of 1990, 252 eleventh grade high-school students, their mothers and 70 math teachers were interviewed about the planned educational reforms. This paper presents data on their answers concerning some of the most critical aspects of the changes (e.g. the role of the ideology, the Churches, establishing private schools, decentralizing the curriculum). Results show that each of the three groups support the planned changes. In general, teachers are the most active proponents of the coming reforms and mothers are the most reluctant. No significant correlation was found between students' and mothers' answers. (Author)

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STUDENTS' OPINION ABOUT THE CHANGES
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STUDENTS' OPINION ABOUT THE CHANGES IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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Paper presented in the
Symposium on Youth and Social Change II: European Perspectives

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Abstract

The change of the political system in Hungary stimulates a great deal of discussion about the consequent modification of the educational system. Almost every aspect of schooling is to be changed: the content of teaching, the basic structure of public education, the decision-making system, the dependency relationships, etc. Within this context we examined how the students perceive the changes around them.

During the spring of 1990, 252 eleventh grade high-school students, their mothers and 70 math teachers were interviewed about the planned educational reforms. This paper presents data on their answers concerning some of the most critical aspects of the changes (e.g. the role of the ideology, the Churches, establishing private schools, decentralizing the curriculum).

Results show that each of the three groups support the planned changes. In general, teachers are the most active proponents of the coming reforms and mothers are the most reluctant. No significant correlation was found between students' and mothers' answers.

Introduction

After the change of the political system in Hungary, a process of change began in the other sectors of society. There has been a great deal of discussion about the required modifications of the educational system.

The problem of the modifying the educational system is rather contradictory: on the one hand the system is not bad as a whole or in every aspect, its outcomes are rather good in international comparison; on the other hand it suffers from the

heritage of the last forty years, and does not fit into the new social-political construction. Furthermore, its major problems are due to the fact that the last regime did not invest enough in education. Most of the schools are poor merely in the economic sense. Considering the present economic situation there is little hope for major investments that would only result in long term returns.

Because of its political aspects, and because most families have relationships with the schools, discussion of the problems goes far beyond the world of schools and the circles of the educational experts. Because previously a lot of social processes were not discussed widely and openly, the contradictions are especially hard for lay people to comprehend, including a lot of newly elected politicians and decision makers.

Almost every aspect of schooling is to be changed. A new Education Act and a separate Higher Education Act is being prepared. The content of teaching is to be changed. Instead of a centrally planned, uniform, nation-wide curriculum, a national core curriculum is to be introduced that defines only about half of the teaching material, leaving the rest to the teachers' discretion. The control of the schools has already been changed. Instead of central state control, local authorities are responsible for running the schools.

The basic structure of public education is to be changed as well. Several alternatives have been suggested to replace the present 8 (elementary) plus 4 (high school) or 3 (vocational training) system, e.g. 4+8 or 6+6, etc. The most frequently proposed 4 (elementary) + 8 (gymnasium) would only be available for a minority of the population and is strongly criticized by some experts because of its social consequences (e.g. the effects of the early selection).

Beside the well prepared nationwide reforms (e.g. curriculum reform, examination system) signs of problems caused by uncoordinated steps have also come to the surface. In this situation it is worth examining how students perceive the changes around them. The results presented here are from 1990, when the suggested steps toward educational reform have already been widely discussed.

Methods

The work presented here is part of a larger investigation. Data were collected May through July 1990.

Ten high schools were selected in a representative way from the high schools of Csongrad County, Hungary. 252 students at these high schools were personally interviewed. Their mothers were also personally interviewed in their homes. 35 high school mathematics teachers from the same schools and 35 math teachers from elementary schools selected in a similar way were also personally interviewed.

The questions used in this work were closed-ended. Subjects responded by using a five-point scale which was presented to them by the interviewer.

Results

The first question asked the subjects about their view of the general effect of the social change on people's motivation to learn. During the last decades intellectuals were underpaid (partly because of ideological reason) and many of the students with a lower socioeconomic status were not motivated to achieve at the school. Thus, it was interesting to know if the subjects expect this situation to change. Figure 1 shows that both students and their mothers think that in the future there will be more incentives to become educated. Students feel more strongly about the effects of the changes than their mothers do. (In this case we don't have data from teachers.)

The next two questions are about the role of the state in education, its administrative control over the schools (Figure 2) and its ideological influence (Figure 3). The questions were formulated so that subjects were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the predicted changes. Each of the three groups strongly support these changes. Teachers are the most radical proponents, students somewhat less supportive and mothers least supportive. Each group considers the end of the dominance of the state ideology more important than the loosening of administrative control. The teachers are especially happy because of the diminishing ideological pressure.

In the question of establishing private schools (Figure 4), teachers are again the most intensive supporters and mothers are the most conservative. Teachers may expect that the larger variety of the schools will help them find a place of work they will like.

The growing role of the Churches is the only question (Figure 5) in the set analyzed where students are less enthusiastic about the changes than their mothers, while teachers are again those who back it the most.

Concerning the question of decentralizing decisions related to the curriculum, teachers are the most reluctant (Figure 6). This is understandable in light of the broad discussion on the planned new curriculum policy. Schools and teachers are going to have more freedom but at the same time they will have more responsibility and more work to do in selecting the teaching materials on their own. Mothers are somewhat more supportive, and students are the strongest proponents of a freer curriculum. It is interesting, that each of the three groups' answers have a bimodal frequency distribution. Thus seemingly there are two definite subgroups of supporters and opponents of the curriculum reform.

Correlation coefficients show that mothers' opinions are more consistent than students' (Tables 1 and 2). The questions concerning the role of the state are strongly related to the other ones, and no significant correlation was found with the motivation question. Thus both proponents and opponents of the transition might think that in the new social order knowledge and competence plays a more important role.

No significant correlation was found between the students' answers and mothers' corresponding answers (Table 3). Similar results are often found in family research that parents and children think in different ways about the same issues. However in this case it is rather surprising that within the families such a deep social turnover does not cause a more consistent way of thinking about the basic issues.

Conclusions

From the point of view of educational reform, it is very positive that the results suggest that those groups most closely related with the educational system are the most dynamic supporters of the coming changes. Both teachers and students consider the transitions as positive, and when the reforms will be carried out an active cooperation can be expected from the teachers. In this context it is not surprising that mothers are more conservative and cautious than their children concerning the planned changes.

It is especially important that students consider the changes as basically positive. This view might help them to cope with the difficulties of the transition. Their perception that knowledge plays a more important role in the new social order, can be a strong motivational factor.

It should serve as a warning, when the group affected most by the predicted change is the most reluctant to back it. One such case is the growing role of the churches. Students are very content because of the diminishing of the former ideology, and they don't want to be affected by another ideology at school. The other such case is some teachers' fear of a growing responsibility resulting from a decentralized curriculum. In these cases, slower and better prepared reforms might work more smoothly.

WILL PEOPLE BE BETTER MOTIVATED TO LEARN?

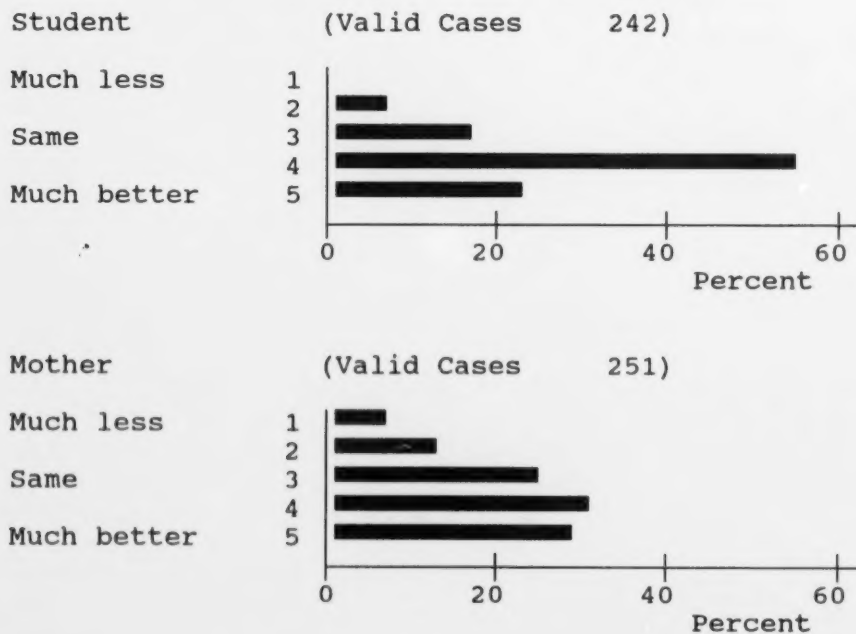


Figure 1

THE ROLE OF STATE CONTROL IS DECREASING

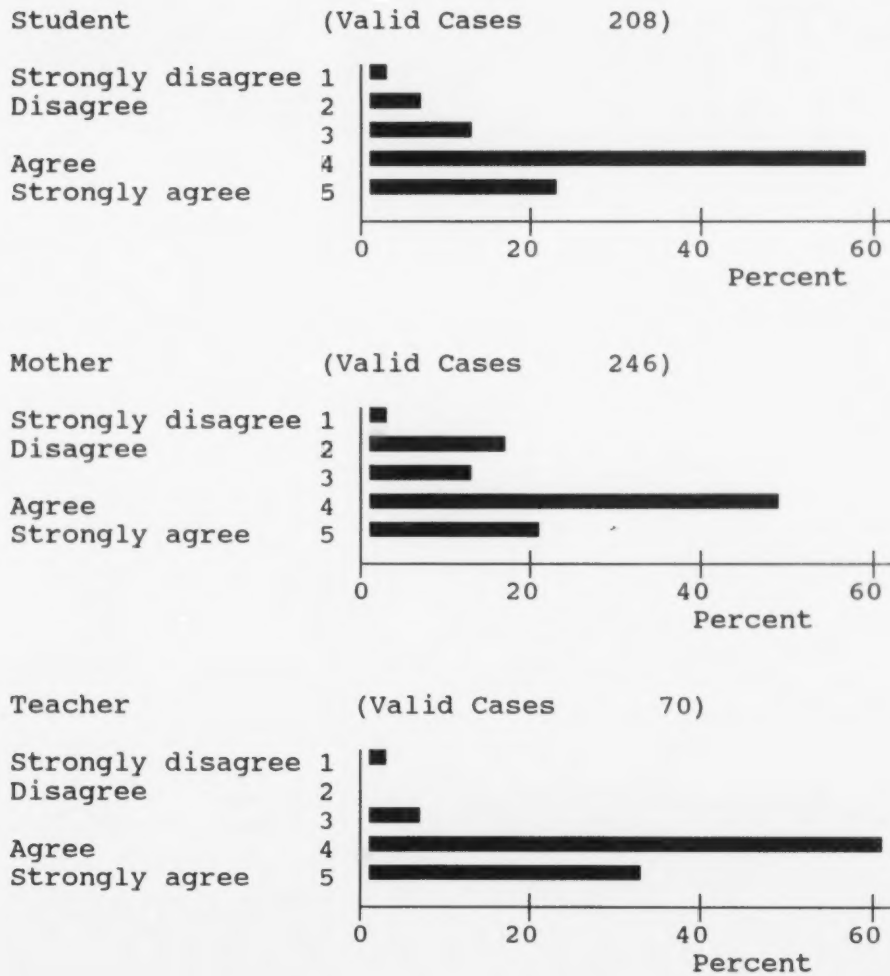


Figure 2

THE STATE IDEOLOGY COME TO AN END

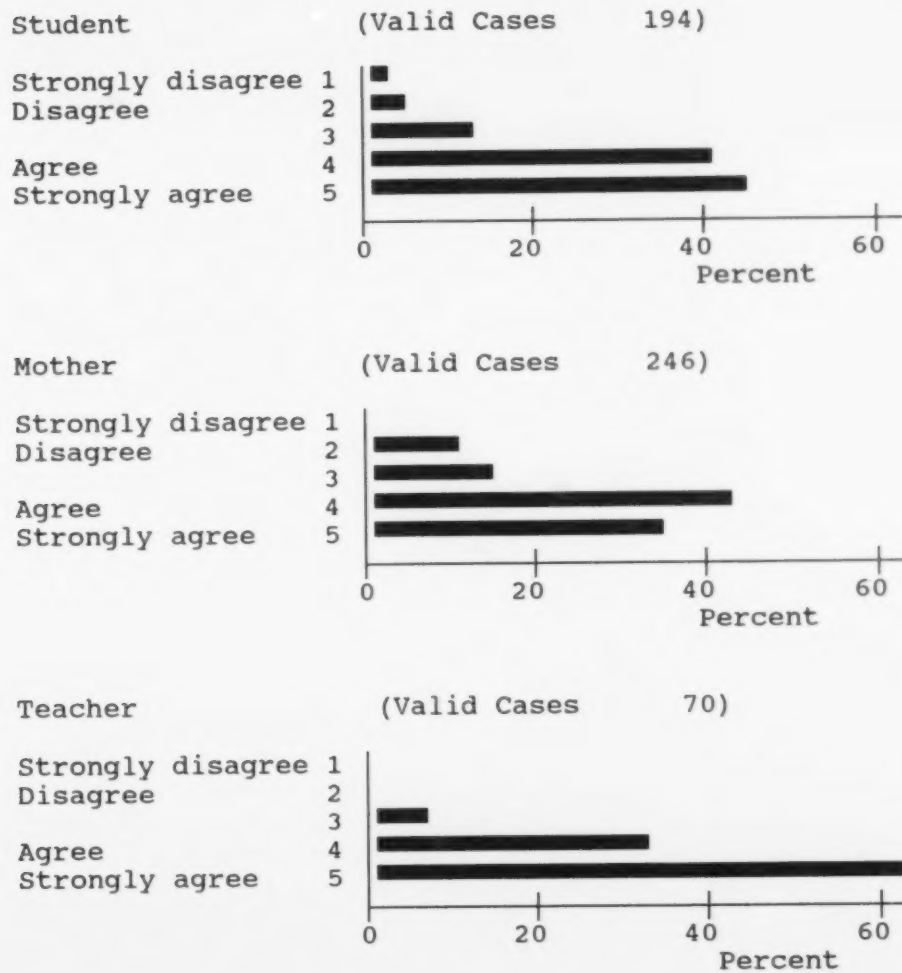


Figure 3

IT WILL BE POSSIBLE TO ESTABLISH PRIVATE SCHOOLS

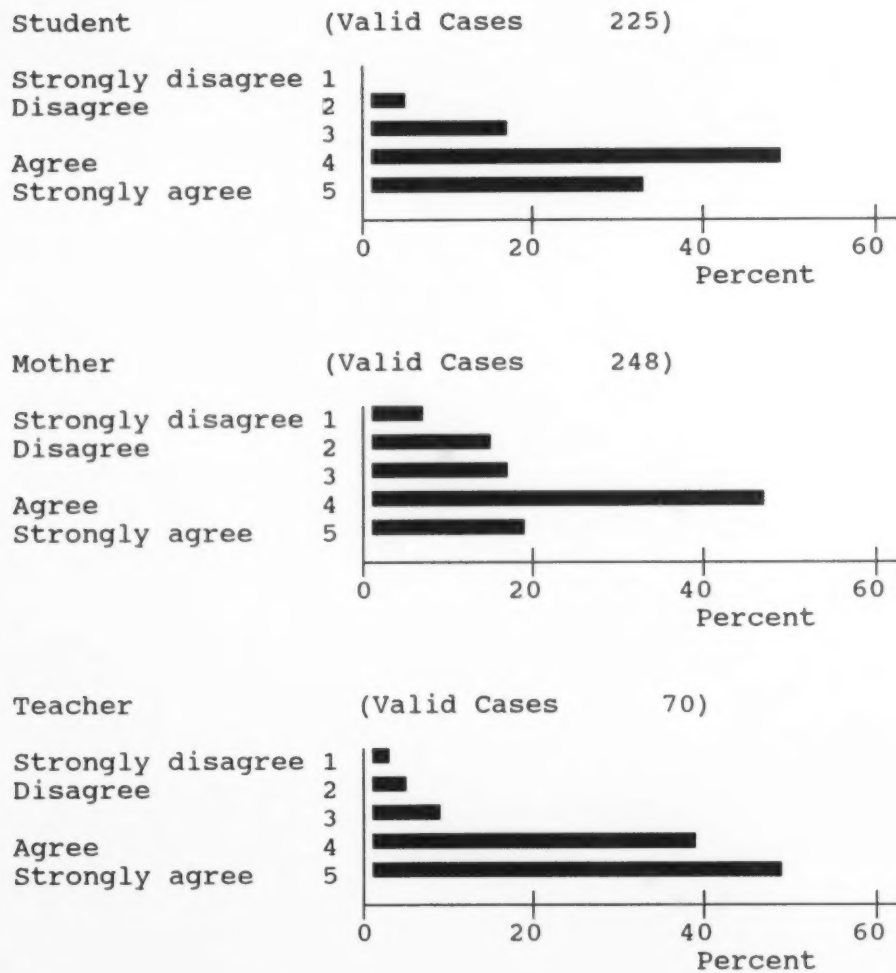
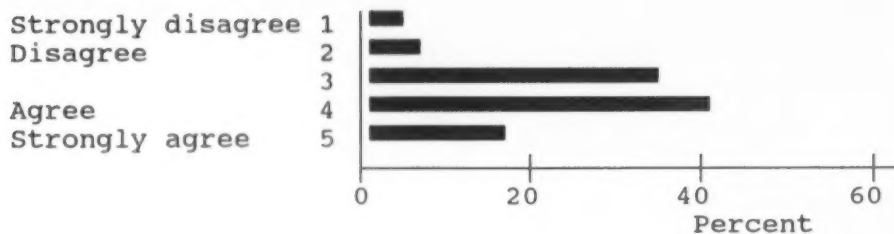


Figure 4

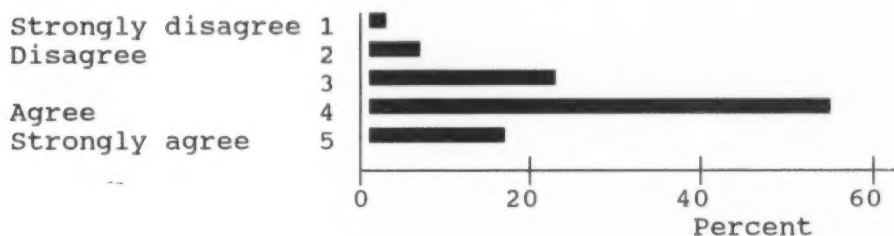
THE ROLE OF CHURCHES IS GROWING

Student



Mother

(Valid Cases 251)



Teacher

(Valid Cases 70)

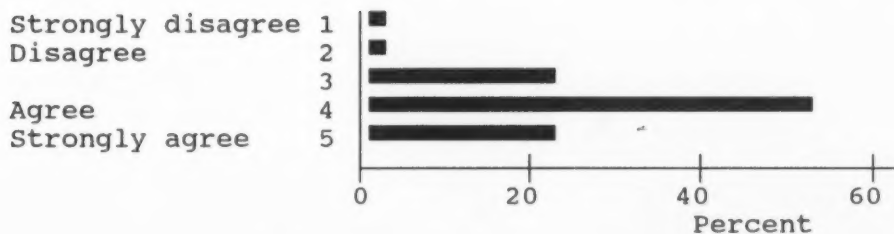


Figure 5

SCHOOLS CAN CHOOSE THE TEACHING MATERIAL

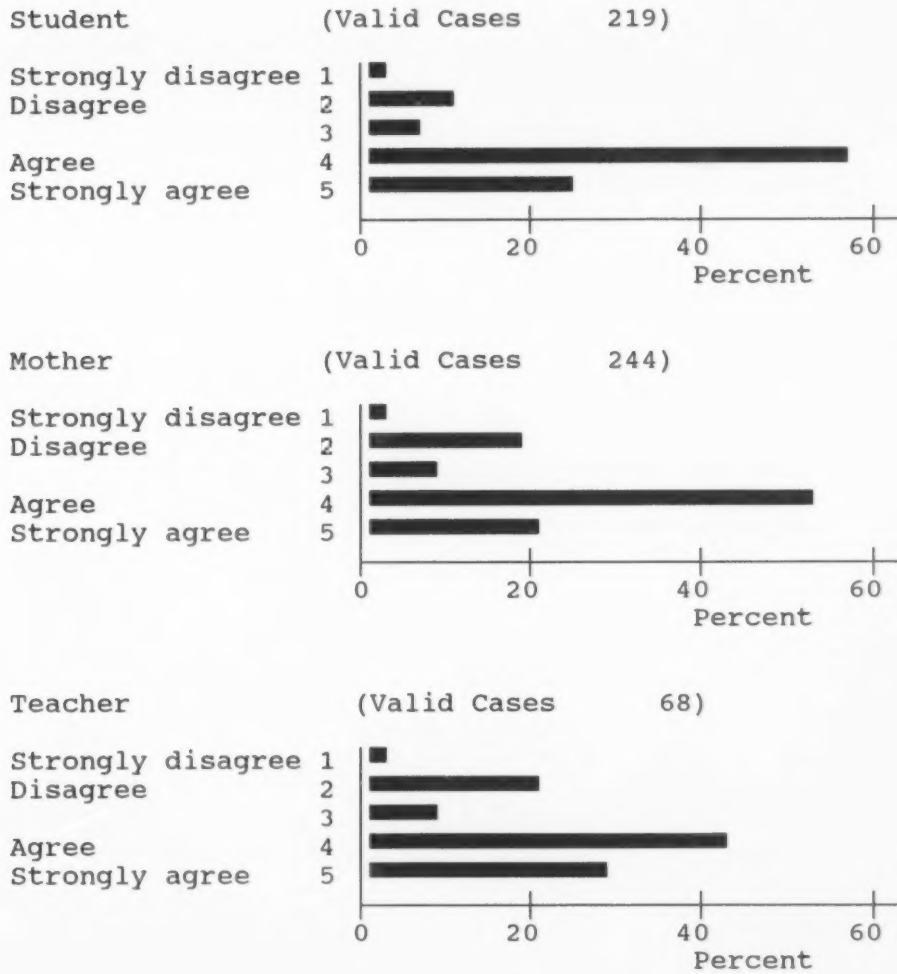


Figure 6

Table 1 Correlations of students' responses

	Motiv.	State ctrl.	Ideol.	Priv. sch.	Churches
State control	.0361				
State ideology	.1147	.4967			
Private schools	-.0113	.2682	.2026		
Role of Churches	.0960	.2483	.1288	.2198	
Schools chose	.0406	.2089	.2312	.0563	-.0128

Table 2 Correlations of mothers' responses

	Motiv.	State ctrl.	Ideol.	Priv.sch.	Churches
State control	.0219				
State ideology	.0758	.5747			
Private schools	.0305	.4741	.4393		
Role of Churches	-.0435	.3205	.2339	.2783	
Schools chose	.1284	.5228	.3177	.3443	.2372

Table 3 Correlations between students' and mothers' responses

Mother	Student	Motiv.	State c.	Ideol.	Priv. sch.	Churches	Sch.ch.
Motivation		-.0403	.1058	.0627	.1485	-.0299	-.0428
State control		-.0193	.1930	.1754	-.0138	.1357	.1356
State ideology		.0028	.1912	.1594	.0186	.0901	.0858
Private schools		.0132	.2001	.0558	.0689	-.0059	.1692
Role of Churches		-.0078	.1533	.1139	-.0121	.0766	-.0423
Schools chose		-.0328	.1126	.0995	.1128	.0493	.1068